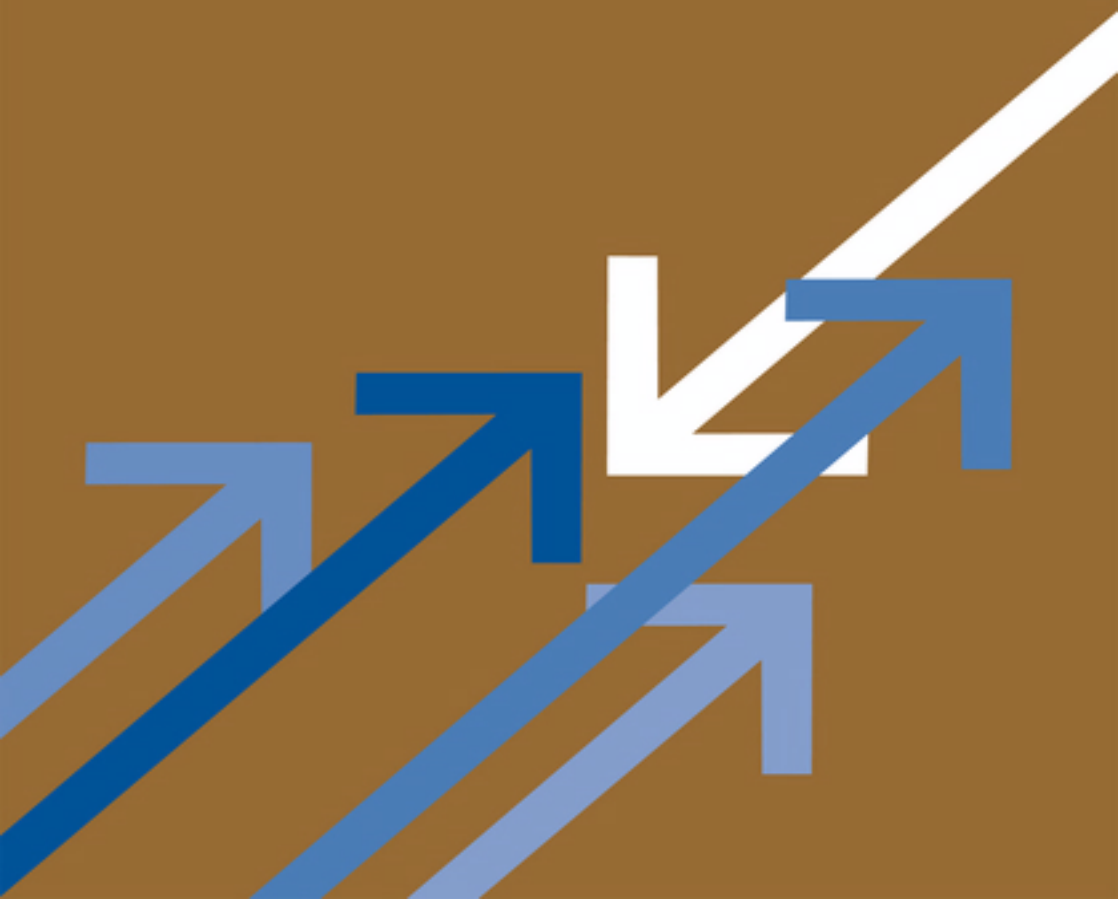


Durable Goods

Pleasure, Wealth and Power
in the Virtuous Life

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Introduction

Social science now finds itself in almost total darkness about the qualities that make life most worth living.

Martin Seligman, 1998

At least as early as Herodotus' account of the encounter between Solon and Croesus,¹ the connection between having external goods and leading a happy human life is a live and important issue within Greek thought. Two distinct theses vie for our assent. On one hand, health, wealth, political advantage, and prosperity—all circumstances contingent upon chance—are generally accepted as inextricable parts of a fully human life. Indeed, the very terms we have come to use to translate the Greek εὐδαιμονία,² 'flourishing' or 'well-being,' carry with them definitive overtones of completeness. The person who flourishes does so not merely in virtue of a narrowly applied set of behaviors or states, but rather precisely insofar as, in a wide range of areas of living and conduct—the intellectual, the moral, the physical, the social, the technical, the spiritual—he exhibits an overarching, all-encompassing state of excellence that transcends any one of these individually. This is the ideal most explicitly expressed in Aristotle's concept of the unity of the virtues, and it is certainly compatible with, if not an explicit doctrine within, other philosophers' systems of thought.

On the other hand, beginning with Socrates' investigations linking, and even identifying, happiness and virtue with knowledge throughout Plato's 'Socratic' dialogues, a central tenet of the ethical tradition is the premise that achieving happiness is within the control of the individual human agent. It would be incomprehensible for the world to be ordered in such a way that the best kind of life for us should be inaccessible to our human efforts, or that we should be held morally responsible for accomplishments or failings which result from circumstances beyond our control. Aristotle expresses this insight when he says that 'all who are not maimed with respect to excellence may win it by a certain kind of study and care' (*EN* I.9, 1099b18–19).

The way in which a philosopher attempts to resolve the tension between these two deeply held, yet opposing intuitive ethical insights has a major impact on the direction of his ethics as a whole. Many contemporary and current issues in the study of ancient Greek ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind are squarely grounded in interpreting the connection between prosperity, virtuous character, knowledge, and the ‘good life,’ εὐδαιμονία, generally. Examples, for instance, include the debate between intellectualism and inclusivism in Aristotle’s ethics, and investigating the Stoic ‘revival’ of Socrates’ identity of virtue and knowledge.

Despite the critical significance of this issue for the development of eudaimonistic ethics, scholarship on the topic of external goods has been piecemeal, parceled out and investigated according to individual figure or philosophic tradition; there has been no comprehensive analysis. As a result, the contemporary discourse in virtue ethics lacks a coherent treatment of the connections—developments, refinements, rejections, responses—between successive philosophers’ thoughts on external goods and εὐδαιμονία. The first task of this work will be to present and develop such an historical analysis of the treatment of external goods in the thought of four central figures and traditions of ancient Greek philosophy: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Each of these traditions addresses the question of external goods, and their role in giving an account of the good life, in a manner uniquely its own, yet is also responsive to the broader *milieu* of the philosophic community and history it inherits. Following upon this exegetical task, I will present and explore analyses of external goods and their role in the constitution of εὐδαιμονία within each school of thought, and considered overall. In what follows I present synopses of each chapter individually.

Chapter 1: The Humanist: Socrates in the Real World

The Socrates we know is, of course, primarily a literary construction, almost a fictional character, so little do we know of Socrates the historical man. Since our account of his philosophy is at best second-hand, preserved primarily in the Platonic dialogues, in which it is used by Plato for his own purposes, we cannot make such bold claims about his thought as we can about other philosophers whose work has survived through a more direct manuscript tradition. Nevertheless, it

may be less important philosophically (though certainly of interest historically) to reconstruct the positions of the historical Socrates—whatever those positions might have been—than to analyze and respond to the received understanding and interpretation of what we might call the ‘Socratic tradition.’ This philosophical tradition had a formative influence on Western ethics starting from Socrates’ immediate successors, through late antique and mediaeval philosophy and even up to the scholarship of the modern period.

One thing that we can derive with reasonable confidence about Socratic ethics is the claim that wisdom, virtue, and happiness share an essential focal meaning, if not a strict identity. Arguments for this claim are found in several of Plato’s dialogues (*Philebus*, *Theaetetus*, *Republic*), and particularly in the *Euthydemus* and *Meno*. Here Socrates maintains both that people take good fortune (εὐτυχία) to be ‘the greatest of the goods,’ and that wisdom (σοφία) can be identified with good fortune because it makes people more fortunate (*Euthydemus* 279c7–8; 279d6). The reason for this is because wisdom never makes a mistake ‘but must necessarily do right and be lucky—otherwise she would no longer be wisdom’ (280a7–8). Inasmuch as knowledge rules and rightly conducts action, it provides people with good fortune and well-doing (εὐπραγία) (281b). The commonly-held thesis that we do well through having many goods might, then, be true, on one important condition: what people usually call ‘goods’—including moral virtues, such as justice, temperance, and courage—are not goods in themselves, but count as goods if and only if practical wisdom (φρονήσις) and wisdom (σοφία) rule over them (*Euthydemus* 281a8–e1). We are not happy by the mere presence of things such as wealth or beauty (*Meno* 87e–88a), because such things can harm us if not guided by σοφία. Similarly, if one takes away knowledge from crafts, such as medicine or shoemaking, no craft can be performed rightly: medicine cannot produce health, nor can shoemaking produce shoes, nor can the pilot’s craft prevent loss of life at sea (*Charmides* 174c–d).³ The right use of these goods (wealth, beauty) and crafts (medicine, shoemaking, piloting) benefits us, and their wrong use harms us (*Meno* 88a–b); knowledge is what guarantees their right use. This distinction can be applied to the moral virtues as well. If we suppose that a moral good, such as courage, is a certain kind of recklessness or boldness, and that, accordingly, it is not accompanied by wisdom, it can indeed harm us. If we want to defend the thesis that moral virtues are necessarily beneficial components of the happy life,

they must somehow be forms of wisdom, since ‘all the qualities of the soul are in themselves neither beneficial nor harmful’, but when directed by wisdom or folly they become beneficial or harmful (*Meno* 88c–d).

The Socratic thesis outlined above not only makes positive claims about wisdom and happiness, however; it equally clearly argues that the standard complement of ‘goods’ shares in the happy life only derivatively, if at all. The premise that wealth, health, beauty, strength, courage, generosity, and the rest of the ἀρεταί are completely neutral with respect to value for our lives is of course appropriated and developed by the Stoics as their central doctrine of ‘indifferents.’ Our investigation into Socrates’ conception of happiness will need to explore the origin and development of this claim, as well as the criteria of harm and benefit to which he appeals in order to justify it. Once we have done this, we will have the basis for evaluating the Socratic position in relation to later traditions, both concurring with and dissenting from his own.

Xenophon tells us that Socrates αὐτὸς δὲ περὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ἀεὶ διελέγετο σκοπῶν, ‘himself always spoke looking toward human affairs’ (*Mem.* I.i.16), and that he chastised other thinkers by questioning them thus:

καὶ πρῶτον μὲν αὐτῶν ἐσκόπει πότερά ποτε νομίσαντες ἱκανῶς ἤδη τάνθρωπινα εἰδέναι ἔρχονται ἐπὶ τὸ περὶ τῶν τοιούτων φροντίζειν ἢ τὰ μὲν ἀνθρώπεια ἀρέντες, τὰ δαιμόνια δὲ σκοποῦντες ἡγοῦνται τὰ προσήκοντα πράττειν.

In the first place, he would inquire of them, did these thinkers suppose that they knew enough about human affairs already that they must think on such [new issues], or that it was their duty to neglect human affairs and consider only things divine? (*Mem.* I.i.12)

In his *Protagoras*, and indeed throughout the early dialogues, Plato presents a portrait of Socrates consistent with this account. Little as we know about the historical Socrates, and as much difficulty we have in constructing Socrates’ philosophy in many cases from the conflicting testimony of his successors, a broad point of agreement is that Socrates cares intensely about investigating the sort of questions central to the human condition, rather than the abstract subject matter traditionally the stuff of natural philosophy. What is justice? What is piety? What is goodness? What is beauty? And, underlying all these, What is the good

life? These are the matters that engage and constitute Socratic inquiry—specifically ἀνθρώπινα, not δαιμόνια, matters.

At first glance, this preoccupation with human affairs would seem quite compatible with a view that Socrates considered external goods to be viable components of living a happy human life. However, the role played by the ‘goods of chance’ in this human inquiry is subject to serious challenge. Socrates famously held that virtue is knowledge, and that even someone who suffers the greatest misfortunes can truly be called happy, so long as he does not flag in exercising his ἀρεταί, that is, by the Socratic equivalence, his knowledge. In addition to this doctrinal commitment, attributed to him by Plato, the extant accounts of Socrates’ life all show that he demonstrated a singular unconcern for acquiring, enjoying, or retaining the sorts of external goods commonly held to be important: money, property, civic or military honors, or political influence. As he tells Antiphon,

“Εοικας, ὦ Ἀντιφῶν, τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν οἰομένῳ τρυφῇ καὶ πολυτέλειαν εἶναι · ἐγὼ δὲ νομίζω τὸ μὲν μηδενὸς δεῖσθαι θεῖον εἶναι, τὸ δ’ ὡς ελαχίστων ἐγγυτάτῳ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ τὸ μὲν θεῖον κράτιστον, τὸ δ’ ἐγγυτάτῳ τοῦ θείου ἐγγυτάτῳ τοῦ κρατίστου.

You seem, Antiphon, to imagine that happiness is luxury and extravagance. But I believe that to have no wants is divine; to have as few as possible comes next to the divine; and as that which is divine is best, so that which approaches nearest to its nature is nearest to the best. (Xen. *Mem.* I.vi.10)

Yet we should not judge too hastily, nor leap to the conclusion that an extreme of asceticism represents the pinnacle of virtue. After all, moderation, not deprivation, is the keyword we find so often in his discussions, and Socrates himself never endorses (nor practices) detachment from, but rather throwing oneself into, the enjoyment of the goods of fortune when they are appropriate. Indeed, enjoyment [ὄψος] is a crucial part of practicing moderation: οὐκ οἶσθ’, ὅτι ὁ μὲν ἥδιστα ἐσθίων ἥκιστα ὄψου δεῖται, ὁ δὲ ἥδιστα πίνων ἥκιστα τοῦ μὴ παρόντος ἐπιθυμεῖ ποτοῦ; ‘Do you not know that the greater the enjoyment of eating the less the need of sauce; the greater the enjoyment of drinking, the less the desire for drinks that are not available?’ (Xen. *Mem.* I.vi.5)

Given that Socrates’ aim is to search out the sorts of things that truly count in living a human life, we have much evidence to support the idea that Socrates recognized a suitable place for the goods of chance in his

conception of the flourishing life, rather than attempting to exclude them.

Chapter 2: The Idealist: Plato in the Realm of Forms

Any conscientious commentator on Plato will have to deal with the issue of organizing his works: whether the Platonic corpus can convincingly be interpreted chronologically, illustrating a development of Plato's thought from a derivative disciple of Socrates' doctrines to a fully mature philosopher presenting his own theories;⁴ or whether we must, as John Cooper convincingly argues, suspend definitive judgments about the relative composition of the various works and, as he puts it,

relegate thoughts about chronology to the secondary position they deserve and ...concentrate on the literary and philosophical content of the works, taken on their own and in relation to the others....chronological hypotheses must not preclude the independent interpretation and evaluation of the philosophical arguments the dialogues contain; so far as possible, the individual texts must be allowed to speak for themselves.⁵

Such eminent Plato scholars as Gregory Vlastos, Charles Kahn, and Gail Fine have weighed in on the debate concerning the appropriate ordering of the dialogues. For our purposes, however, we can afford to set this issue aside as secondary. No matter how one approaches the Platonic corpus, it is accepted that the *Philebus* is certainly one of Plato's last works, and is also generally agreed to be the work that represents Plato's most mature positions on the question of identifying the good human life overall. Unlike the earlier 'Socratic' dialogues, the *Philebus* portrays the character of Socrates not in a state of perpetual inquiry and ἀπορία, but rather propounding a definite set of views through the development of the conversation: Protarchus tells him 'we should not take it that the aim of our meeting is universal confusion; if we cannot solve the problem, you must do it, for you promised' (*Philebus* 20a3–4), and Socrates proves more than willing to oblige him.

Philebus, Socrates' first interlocutor, represents the position that pleasure constitutes the good for humans (though through most of the dialogue it is Protarchus who converses on behalf of this position, with *Philebus* contributing occasional supporting comments). 'Philebus holds that what is good for all creatures is to enjoy themselves, to be pleased